

It is not what it seems.

Heart break leads to mental health difficulties in higher education.

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The issue a client brings through the door is often not the issue counsellors and psychologists end up working on. Relationship break-ups are at the core of why most people seek counselling. The same is possibly true in the context of higher education. Students and staff members who seek counselling for common mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression could be in fact heart broken. A series of 15 semi-structured interviews with psychologists around Australia revealed that although relationship difficulties are one of the main reasons clients seek counselling, that is not the issue they report in the first session. The most common issues presented by clients are anxiety, depression, substance abuse, adjustment disorder, and personality disorder. Yet, a major gap in the literature exists regarding the effect of romantic relationship break-ups on the mental health of individuals. A recent meta-analysis provides evidence that both negative relationship quality and relationship break-ups are strongly associated with poor mental health outcomes. Also, it is known that one of the main obstacles in maintaining relationships is risk regulation and balance between relationship stressors and conflicting goals. It is possible that divergent academic and relationship goals might be leading to mental health difficulties in students and staff in higher education. Therefore, it is the role of counsellors and psychologists to explore the core issues a client might be experiencing underneath their initial presentation and work with them to find a balance between study, work, and love.